

MARRIAGE
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July 6, 2014
14th Sunday of Ordinary Time
Shepherdstown Presbyterian Church

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Genesis 24:34-67

Then Isaac brought Rebekah into his mother Sarah's tent. She became his wife; and he loved her. So Isaac was comforted after his mother's death.

And now this little anecdote from Jim Atwood's booklet, *When Wisdom and Laughter Meet*.

When Gene Robinson, a gay priest with a partner, was ordained as a bishop in the Episcopal Church, in June 2003, it prompted one writer from the Los Angeles Times to comment, "The actions taken by the New Hampshire Episcopalians are an affront to Christians everywhere. I am just thankful that the Episcopal Church's founder, Henry VIII, and his wives Catherine of Aragon, Anne Boleyn, Jane Seymour, Anne of Cleves, Katherine Howard, and Catherine Parr are no longer here to suffer through this assault on our traditional Christian marriage."

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Marriage is on my mind this morning. In case you missed the announcement last Sunday, my son Jonah and Jade Pope are at last officially engaged. Not exactly a surprise; but a delight nonetheless. A wedding is in the works for next year. That's one reason marriage is on my mind. But there are more.

In case you hadn't heard, the wedding of Morgan Wisniewski and Patrick Sell is also in the works for next year. And that's not all. On the last Saturday of August, Christy Clegg and Christopher Thatcher will establish a marriage covenant here and the following Saturday, Miriam Sanders and Mark Rakes.

Of course, a wedding is not a marriage. A wedding is the formal and public celebration of the "marrying" of two persons that began well before the wedding and will carry on long, long afterwards.

Marriage is on my mind. But it's not just because of forthcoming weddings.

In case you hadn't heard, the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church (USA) has proposed changing the definition of marriage from a commitment between "a man and a woman," to a commitment between "two people."

Marriage is a gift God has given to all humankind for the well-being of the entire human family. Marriage involves a unique commitment between two people, traditionally a man and a woman, to love and support each other for the rest of their lives.

That change will take effect one year from now if a majority of the 172 regional presbyteries approve. In the meantime, Presbyterian ministers are now permitted for the first time to officiate same gender marriages in states that permit it.

West Virginia doesn't.

So I can't "officiate" same gender marriages here in our sanctuary. But I can offer a "blessing" on marriages legally established elsewhere.

And thus I was able to offer a blessing on two marriages of parishioners legally married in 2013 in the State of Maryland. Richard and Donald's blessing ceremony was in this sanctuary a year ago April and George and Roger's this past January.

As you know, more and more states are embracing and establishing marriage equality. There are many reasons to love this beautiful nation of ours—and that's yet another. We are still forging "a thoroughfare of freedom across the wilderness." (O Beautiful for Spacious Skies)

Marriage is on my mind this morning. And it was on my mind even before I looked at the appointed lessons for this Sunday. WOW.

The first lesson from Genesis is about the arranged marriage of Isaac and Rebekah that turned out to be pretty romantic and quite fruitful. And then there's the lesson from "Song of Solomon," that extended erotic love poem, which I'm pretty sure inspired Nora Jones' song, "Come Away with Me."

The voice of my beloved! Look, he comes, leaping upon the mountains, bounding over the hills. My beloved is like a gazelle. Look, there he stands behind our wall, gazing in at the windows, looking through the lattice. My beloved speaks and says to me: "Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me." (Song of Solomon 2:8-11)

And that's just a warm-up. The poem gets a lot steamier! (Methinks, you should be of a certain age before reading it.)

By the way, according to legend, King Solomon had a thousand wives in his harem, which, I'm pretty sure, is not the model of marriage certain Christians have in mind when they advocate "biblical marriage." Biblical marriages include multiple wives, concubines and a thing called Levirate marriages in which an unmarried brother had to marry the widow of his brother if she was childless. Certain brothers and sisters here this morning would find that custom horrifying!

Obviously marriage customs vary from time to time and place to place. In many cultures woman are regarded as property and thus are "given away" by the father to the groom in the hopes of improving each other's economic status.

In this country not too long ago, wedding ceremonies began with this question: *who "gives" this woman to be married to this man?* Furthermore, the bride's vow, not the groom's, included a promise to "submit and obey." At that time it was customary for the bride to receive a ring of ownership but not the groom. The only thing missing was a few head of cattle, a flock of sheep, or a couple camels to make the transaction complete.

That kind of "ownership" language is no longer used in this church. But I do honor that tradition by asking the father, or whoever escorts the bride down the aisle: *who presents this woman to be married to this man.* "Presenting" is one thing; "giving away" is another.

Marriage customs and practices have changed over time. In this country interracial marriages were once illegal. Wives were once considered second class citizens often confined to housework, unable to obtain loans or credit cards on their own, subjected to the rule of her husband with little legal defense in cases of abuse.

Things change. Societies change. The church changes.

Based on a certain reading of the Bible the church once condemned divorce and refused to bless a second marriage. But that changed just in the past 100 years.

Once upon a time—and for a really long time—based on a certain reading of the Bible, the church thought marriage was only for the procreation of children. But the church would eventually bless some marriages with no prospects (or desire) for children.

Once upon a time, Christians read the Bible story about the creation of Eve from Adam's rib as an argument for marriage as heterosexual only and only for procreation. But lately we noticed something: *the story is not so much about heterosexuality or procreation or anatomical parts that fit, as much as it is about companionship—hearts and souls befitting each*

other.

According to the mythic folktale from the great ancestors (Genesis 2), the solitary human one—Adam, the “earthling,” neither male or female at this point—was lonely. “It is not good for the human one to be alone,” said the Creator. At the time (in this story) there were no animals—just this one earthling. (Remember this is not science; it’s a folk tale.)

So the Lord created all the animals in the world one by one to see if the human one could find a suitable soul mate. None were. So the creator made someone nearly identical to the other one. “At last! This one is flesh of my flesh; bone of my bone.” You see, the Lord allowed the human one to “choose” a companion most suitable for relieving its existential loneliness.

It took a while but the church is now beginning to see and understand a deeper truth. Sexual differences are important, of course. And procreation is important. Marriage can be a safe nest for children, but children are not the sole purpose of marriage. Intimate companionship is equally important. Furthermore, marriage itself is not necessary for a person to enjoy a full and abundant life. It’s an option, a kind of vocation.

Marriage in the Christian tradition is about sharing a life with one other person in a covenant of mutual love and respect. But a Christian marriage is also about Christ’s invitation (“the Great Perhaps”) to love God and others wholeheartedly—not just self; not just the one other; but others, including the whole world if possible. Marriage can be a “base camp” for an adventure in bold, expansive and creative compassion.

And so as part of wedding ceremonies here, I ask the couple standing before me: *In your baptism you have been called to love God and others wholeheartedly. Do you intend to honor this calling in and through the covenant of marriage?*

Thirty some years ago I officiated a wedding in Goshen, Indiana. Jennifer Headings, the bride, was a child of this church. She and Kevin Graber selected a hymn for their wedding I’d never heard before. It was entitled “The Servant Song.” At the time I thought it a strange choice to be sung at a wedding. But it now makes perfect sense to me because, as it turns out, “marriage” is a metaphor—in various religious traditions—for the joining or yoking of our hearts with God, with the divine.

The Beloved speaks and says to me: “Arise, my love, my fair one, and come away with me.”

As the gospel lesson for today puts it: *Jesus said, come unto me all you who are weary, carrying heavy burdens and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you and learn of me for my yoke is easy and my burden light.* (Matthew 11:29-30)

Marriage is one way—but *not the only way*—to bring Christ’s healing light into the world. And, as it turns out, to hold forth that light is really not much of a burden after all. For the burden itself is “light.”

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HYMN
“The Servant Song”